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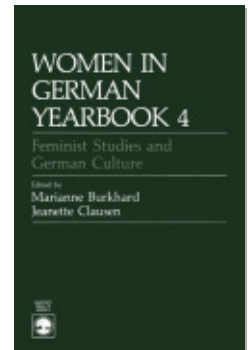
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Katharina Blum: Violence and the Exploitation of Sexuality

Charlotte Armster

In 1974, Heinrich Böll's then recent novel Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum was serialized in the West German magazine Der Spiegel. The appearance of the novel in the news magazine was notable, as it marked the first time that Spiegel published a literary work in its entirety. The novel's literary merit was not, however, the reason the editors chose to make an exception to their usual policies regarding what they print. Instead, Böll's short novel was viewed as having actual news value in that it possessed a direct tie to immediate political events in Germany. In Spiegel's own words: "Eine denkwürdige publizistische Affäre - Bölls Kontroverse mit 'Bild' über dessen Baader-Meinhof-Berichte - hat ein aktuelles belletristisches Nachspiel: In einer Erzählung mit dem Titel Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum oder: Wie Gewalt entstehen und wohin sie führen kann attackiert der Kölner Literatur-Nobelpreisträger 'gewisse journalistische Praktiken'"1

To Spiegel editors, the publication of Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum was seen as the continuation of a bitter public confrontation between Böll and the Springer-controlled press. In January 1972, Böll had written an article for Der Spiegel entitled "Will Ulrike Meinhof Gnade oder freies Geleit?" It was in part a response to an earlier story in the Bild, and its main point was to call into question the role which the Springer press had in escalating the violence exhibited by both the German police and such radical groups as Baader-Meinhof. Bild, and similar publications such as Quick, immediately targeted Böll for public vilification. In their pages he was repeatedly denounced and accused of latent and intellectual complicity with terrorist groups. The stories had an effect. On June 1, 1972 the police surrounded and searched Böll's country house in the Eifel region, believing it to be a possible hide-out for Ulrike Meinhof.²

Other news articles, including ones in Die Zeit and Süddeutsche Zeitung, tended to stress the political aspects of the novel.³ Böll himself, within the structure of the novel, seemed to invite interpretations which concentrated attention on the relationship between his narrative content and actual political events. "Sollten sich bei dieser Schilderung gewisser journalistischen Praktiken Ähnlichkeiten mit den Praktiken der 'Bild'-Zeitung ergeben haben," reads in part an ironic disclaimer at the beginning of the novel, "so sind diese Ähnlichkeiten weder beabsichtigt noch zufällig, sondern unvermeidlich." With these words, a comparison between the fictional world of the novel and Böll's actual experiences with the Springer press became inevitable.

In light of the political climate at the time, it is not surprising that many initial interpretations of Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum were primarily concerned with obvious connections to the external world. Such an approach, however, obscured the sexual exploitation depicted in the novel (which is integral to the entire plot development) and concentrated almost solely on the political reality of West Germany. This is most readily apparent in the fact that these interpretations emphasized the importance of the subtitle: "How violence develops and where it can lead"--and neglected the importance of the primary title: "The lost honor of Katharina Blum." The sexual nature of "lost honor" and its connection to violence, as implied by the interplay between title and subtitle, was simply overlooked.

In the few early interpretations where sexual aspects of the novel's structure were noted, their significance was completely downplayed. Rainer Nägele, for example, criticized the ambiguity of Katharina's use of her vulgar word bumsen with the argument:

Offenbar wollte Böll hier den Zusammenhang von Wort und Gewalt in Wortspiel zur Unmittelbarkeit verdichten. Das ist ihm einerseits zwar gelungen, jedoch mit bedenklichen Kosten: denn was das Wortspiel symbolisch verdichtet, löst es im Kontext der Handlung auf, indem es die Motivation verwirrt und den Schuß zur Reaktion auf eine sexuelle Attacke macht, womit die von der Recherche mühsam aufgebauten Motivationszusammenhänge gefährlich in Frage gestellt werden.⁴

In fact, the motivation for killing Tötges is not confused in the sense that Nägele believes. From the beginning, a misuse of sexual innuendo and sexual terms provides the basis for the subsequent violence in the novel.

The most extreme example of an interpretation which disregards the importance of sexual aspects in the novel was that of Marcel Reich-Ranicki. According to him, any sexual problems present in the story arose from the fact that Katharina Blum is frigid. ("Sie leidet . . . an ihrer Frigidität."⁵) For him, sexuality was totally irrelevant to the political concerns of the novel.

The concern with the political nature of Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum has continued, but as events which related to the novel have passed, some literary critics have finally begun a more intrinsic examination of the work. Most frequently, these analyses have focused on structural aspects, including narrative perspective, genre form, and such elements as the symbolic significance of character names.⁶ Yet, even these less political approaches to the novel have failed to explore in detail the sexual exploitation of the heroine. When the sexual tones dominant throughout the work have been touched, they have generally been relegated to minor significance. The notion of "lost honor" is viewed as "old-fashioned," or the characterization of Katharina Blum as a "prude" is accepted at face value, or her behavior is termed "romantically idealistic."⁷

The repeated attempt to exclude or to reduce the importance of the sexual implications in Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum has meant that the political--and not the sexual--qualities of the novel are still generally considered to be primary to the novel's meaning. The fact that sexual stereotypes motivate much of the political action has simply been isolated from the novel's overall meaning. Yet, Katharina Blum, whose name is central to the title, is not simply an arbitrary figure made to serve the text as a convenient vehicle through which a political message is revealed or exemplified. Instead, her character as a woman is crucial for an understanding of the novel. "Lost honor"--referred to in the primary title--is a concept which denotes a loss of virginity or something sexual when applied to women. And it is this "woman's honor" which first must be comprehended in order to discern the connection with violence mentioned in the subtitle.

The reader learns almost nothing about Katharina Blum, including her honor, in a direct manner. Almost all information about her is derived from a variety of documents--newspaper articles, police reports, interviews--and these in turn are transmitted through a seemingly objective narrator who gathers facts much the way a journalist might. To a certain extent, the narrator (presumably male) serves as a counterweight to the actual journalist Tötges, from whom the slanderous newspaper accounts originate.

In part, Böll's use of this narrative structure serves to provide the text with a type of control against which the varying "fact-gatherers" in the novel are to be measured. Journalists and police, for example, supposedly serve as public fact-gatherers, and it could be assumed that their portrait of Katharina Blum would be based on the objectivity of facts. Yet, the factual evidence presented by the narrator makes clear that the supposed objectivity of the journalist Tötges and the police is distinctly biased. Their reports are deliberately distorted and serve interests other than objective fact-finding.

Despite the narrator's role as counterbalance to Tötges and the police, his presentation of the facts is not without bias. His own anger surfaces in ironic comments. "Hier ist endlich ein Gebiet, wo Kirchen und Gewerkschaften zusammenarbeiten könnten," he writes after a critical passage on the practice of tapping telephones. "Man könnte doch mindestens eine Art Bildungsprogramm für Abhörer planen. Tonbänder mit Geschichtsunterricht. Das kostet nicht viel."⁸ Elsewhere, when mentioning Katherina Blum's organizational talents, he remarks that these abilities are received "als Schreckensnachricht durch alle Haftanstalten. Man sieht: Korrektheit, mit planerischer Intelligenz verbunden ist nirgendwo erwünscht, nicht einmal in Gefängnissen, und nicht einmal von der Verwaltung" (113).

Interestingly, the narrator's most open irony is directed toward bureaucratic targets. When presenting descriptions of Katharina Blum, there is no mockery--although the possibility exists. The categories used by others to describe Katharina Blum--the sympathetic as well as the hostile ones--are invariably sexual. The narrator makes no comment on this, but simply reproduces both in a seemingly objective manner. His supposed objectivity is a limited perspective, which does not allow him to comprehend fully the sexual nature of the

conflict. Like many of the critics, his eyes are focused on the political implications.

From the moment the police storm Katharina Blum's apartment, the fact that she is a woman provides a special vulnerability. In an attempt to humiliate her in order to extract a confession, the police immediately categorize her night spent with Ludwig Göttens in the most vulgar of terms: "Beizmenne (the police inspector) soll die aufreizend gelassen an ihrer Anrichte lehrende Katharina nämlich gefragt haben: 'Hat er dich denn gefickt,' woraufhin Katharina sowohl rot geworden sein wie in stolzem Triumph gesagt haben soll: 'Nein, ich würde es nicht so nennen'" (18). It was a fleeting triumph, as verbal sexual abuse became the method by which Katharina Blum was attacked.

What the police began, the journalist Tötges continued and expanded. The discrepancy between the newspaper's statements about Katharina Blum and the facts which the narrator uncovers is readily apparent. Tötges altered, for example, the characterization of Katharina Blum as "eine sehr kluge und kühle Person" (32) to read that she is "eiskalt und berechnend" (33). The testimony "Wenn Katharina radikal ist, dann ist sie radikal hilfsbereit, plannvoll und intelligent" is transformed into the quote: "Eine in jeder Beziehung radikale Person, die uns geschickt getäuscht hat" (38). Her mother's lament-- "Warum mußte das so enden, warum mußte das so kommen?-- is changed to: "So mußte es ja kommen, so mußte es ja enden" (91). Other alleged facts presented by Tötges are similarly falsified: her father is labeled a communist, her mother an alcoholic, and Katharina herself is said to be fully capable of committing a crime.

Tötges's distortions are obvious when viewed in light of the documentation provided by the narrator. In order to create a sensational story which will sell well, Tötges manipulates, falsifies, and even fabricates facts and quotes. What is not immediately apparent, however, is that the success of his slander depends upon specific public stereotypes of women. Before the labels of "radical" and "communist" assume emotional significance for readers of the newspaper, Katharina Blum must be degraded sexually and made into "that kind of woman" who would do anything. As with the police, Tötges's attack begins with verbal sexual abuse.

Eiskalt und berechnend is Tötges's first characterization meant to undermine Katharina Blum's reputation by

attacking her sexuality. To label a woman "ice-cold and calculating" implies that she is someone without feelings who will do anything to achieve her ends, including using her own sexuality. To malign her further, Tötges then speaks (as do the police) of Herrenbesuche, intimating that she is a prostitute. In fact, everything Tötges writes about Katharina Blum presents the image of a woman of questionable virtue. By questioning publicly her sexual purity, he undermines her character in all respects so that readers will view her as a criminal with questionable political beliefs.

The direct connection between questionable sexuality and criminal behavior is made by Tötges when he writes about Katharina Blum's reputed long-term relationship with Ludwig Götten. He calls her a "Räuberliebchen" and a "Mörderbraut" (32, 35). A characterization is again made in sexual terms, but now in combination with criminal labels. Of course, Katharina Blum is neither a "robber" nor a "murderer." Her ostensible "crime" is being sexually involved with a "criminal." By associating sexuality with criminality in this way, Tötges succeeds in discrediting Katharina Blum doubly. Questioning her sexual virtue lent credence to the public depiction of her as a criminal. To discredit her politically then becomes easy.

That a woman's honor, and not a man's, can be attacked by sexual innuendo is underscored in the text by the figure of Alois Sträubleder. A prominent industrialist, Sträubleder functions as a minor counterpoint to Katharina Blum. In contrast to Katharina Blum, whose reputation depends upon her sexual virtue, Sträubleder indicates that public knowledge of illicit romance could not harm him. "Eine romantische Frauengeschichte bringt mich höchstens privat in Schwierigkeiten, nicht öffentlich. Da würde nicht einmal ein Foto mit einer so attraktiven Frau wie Katharina Blum schaden," he says (81). He even implies that his reputation as a man might be enhanced by a sex-linked scandal. His only worry is that such a story might suggest an association with criminals. Sexuality for Sträubleder is a private matter, not subject to public dishonor.

Because Tötges succeeds in dishonoring Katharina Blum by exploiting her sexuality in the public sphere of politics and journalism, it appears that she seeks revenge and kills him. On the surface, the motif of "lost honor" and revenge seems to establish the connection between the title of the novel and the violence

referred to in the subtitle. This motif, however, functions largely as cliché or stereotypical theme, masking the fact that a different, more lethal type of violence other than Katharina Blum's act of murder relates to honor within the framework of the novel. As Wolfram Schutte wrote in an early review: "Die Gewalt, von der die Rede ist, geht von der Presse aus, und führt Katharina Blum zum Mord."⁹

The violence which permeates the novel is foremost a violence committed through the medium of language. Violence occurs through the use of words as weapons rather than guns. Words and language create a story based on lies, innuendo, and misrepresentation. The world is ordered linguistically in such a way that it is destructive to the individual, and therein lies its inherent violent quality. By the misuse of words, the sanctity of the individual is violated.¹⁰

Although language can be made to impart a quality of violence, it is not language per se which is violent. Tötges does not succeed in his attack on Katharina Blum solely because he distorts facts or misuses language. The images he creates of Katharina Blum, though bound by a certain inner consistency, do not have intrinsic meaning. Instead, they gain their meaning from a set of rigid sexual stereotypes embedded in societal consciousness. To have meaning, his characterization of Katharina Blum is in need of these specific referents. His images do not represent any form of pure linguistic or artistic invention, but are inventions in the form of distortions--and these distortions are meant only to give expression to a distorted, yet widely accepted view of reality in which women and men are characterized and judged in terms of sexual stereotypes and gender role expectations.

The connection between language and reality is underscored by Böll's disclaimer which prefaces the novel. His disclaimer is purposefully unsubtle, as it points a finger at the actual publishing concern of Axel Springer. The reader is made aware of a real situation outside the text, even if unaware of West Germany's political climate. The result is a parody of what has become a standard literary form--that is, a pro forma denial that the fictional reality of a particular book is in any way based on actual characters and events. For Böll, the connection between fictional reality and our social reality is implicit. Tötges and his manner of reporting are not meant to be singular to him as a

particular (and in this case fictionalized) individual. Instead, his reporting is representative of a whole type of journalism. And the success of this reporting depends on preconceived gender expectations, which prepare the reader to accept as fact certain sexual stereotypes.

In the case of Katharina Blum, for example, her sucure financial situation is "explained" (by both the police and Tötges) by the supposition that she works as a prostitute. Her long solitary drives are first seen as trips to "gentlemen visitors," then as journeys to "case" a villa for her lover. Her divorce is reported as caused by adultery. Her mother's death is attributed to shock at her "loose" ways. And her reactions are consistently described as "analytical" rather than "emotional"--a characterization for a woman which immediately implies she is hardened and deceptive. This reduction of reality to sexual stereotypes--conveyed through language--is the initial violence in the novel.

Once a woman has "lost" her sexual "honor," there exists no possibility to reverse or halt the process which judges and condemns her. The terms used to censure and describe her are locked into place, and she is tainted for life. If the individual seeks recourse, revenge is the only choice. Katharina Blum's act of physical (i.e., "real") violence appears to form a part of this unvarying circle. In conformity with clichéd expectations, a woman's lost honor is avenged by the murder of the man who besmirched her reputation. The only break with the stereotype is the fact that Katharina Blum does not remain a passive female, dependent upon a man to revenge her honor. She herself becomes her own agent of revenge. Yet her act alters nothing. By killing Tötges, she becomes an outcast as a convicted criminal. This does allow her to join the world of her lover, but the reunion is only symbolic. Her violence is nothing more than an act of defiance, but not a genuine alternative.

But does Katharina Blum kill Tötges to avenge her lost honor? Although both title and plot seemingly portray the familiar theme of lost honor revenged, Katharina Blum is actually motivated to commit murder for reasons apart from a sense of lost honor. She shoots Tötges to protect the integrity and sanctity of her own inner world, rather than to defend a stereotypical idea of honor in which she does not believe. For her, a woman's honor is something other than her sexual purity.

Within the novel, a contradiction exists between the public image of Katharina Blum and her own private self-conception. Tötges and the police contribute most to the creation of the public image. As already noted, this image does not rest on actual facts, but is based on a set of sexual stereotypes. Katharina Blum's efficiency, thriftiness, and modest lifestyle--all of which enable her to buy her own apartment--are overlooked as qualities uncharacteristic for a woman. Instead, the assumption is made that a wealthy "customer" (or "customers") supports her.

This conception of Katharina Blum relegates her to a dependent position, similar to that of a child. At the first police interrogation, her sense of independence goes completely unnoticed. Commissioner Beizmenne, at first harsh and authoritarian, adopts a "fatherly" tone and condescendingly reassures her that it is acceptable for a woman in her position to receive "gentlemen visitors" (Herrenbesuch). Later, one of the policemen also suggests that she (the potential criminal) is in need of protection and should be jailed for her own safety.

It is this public portrait of Katharina Blum, based on repeated factual distortions and sexual stereotypes, for which the concept "lost honor" has meaning. Publicly, her sexual behavior is placed into question, thereby dishonoring her. Within her own private world, however, there is never a loss of honor in the same sexual sense. At no time does she understand her relationship with Ludwig Götten in terms of lost honor. Instead, she gropes for other categories to define her sexual relationships. Important to her is Zärtlichkeit as opposed to Zudringlichkeit.

Katharina Blum does not develop these categories. They remain private and personal, and are not understood in the public sphere. Nevertheless, they do point to an attempt on her part to define her sexuality in terms other than those implied in such stereotypes as "lost honor." And it is this attempt to articulate her own understanding of sexuality which creates conflict when she is confronted with established norms.

To a large extent, Katharina Blum is unable to make publicly clear her private values because they remain an unconscious part of herself. She in no way regards herself as different, although in reality she lives a life which is quite different from others. The life which she has created mirrors that of an average single woman. Her

taste in books, her leisure activities, her condominium, and her friends are all evidence of a basically middle-class mentality. Yet, behind this seemingly average existence is something which makes her stand out. She possesses an unusual independence, as is made clear by her financial arrangements with the Blornas, her divorce, and her refusal to engage in meaningless sexual relationships. It is this uniqueness which the police and Tötges are unable to comprehend, as it does not conform to their preconceived stereotypes.

Honor in its conventional sense bears little real meaning for Katharina Blum. By maintaining her own private values, her personal sense of honor remains intact, even while she suffers a public loss of honor. But rapidly, the sexual stereotypes used to characterized her begin to undermine and threaten her private world. In a number of ways, the public smear campaign initiated by Tötges intrudes on Katharina Blum's private sphere. Obscene phone calls and sexual solicitations by unknown neighbors become common. Her private world is attacked, and is in no way protected--not even by her friends and close acquaintances. They, too, essentially perceive her in terms of sexual stereotypes.

The manner in which Katharina Blum's friends view her does differ from that of the police and Tötges, yet their characterizations are also primarily sexually based. Her employer and friend Hubert Blorna, for example, cannot describe her without sexual reference. Although he on occasion speaks of her modesty and efficiency, equally important to him is her physical attractiveness and what he considers her sexual prudishness. In his eyes, she is a helpless and vulnerable female.

The belief that Katharina Blum is sexually prudish is shared by most of her acquaintances, who repeatedly refer to her as "the nun." The image of Katharina Blum as a nun is interesting, because it is diametrically opposed to the one formed by the police and Tötges. Despite the contradictory nature of the two images, neither presents an accurate portrait of Katharina Blum. Neither recognizes in any way her private set of values or her personal identity, and both represent extremes frequently used to characterize a woman--a whore or a nun. Her values are consequently distorted by both, as she is perceived only in terms of sexual stereotypes. In the case of Tötges, her aloofness, which originates from the desire to find someone zärtlich, is misconstrued negatively in such a way as to depict her as eiskalt

und berechnend. For friends and acquaintances, this same quality is endearingly understood as sexual prudishness.

The fact that close acquaintances, similarly to the police and Tötges, view Katharina Blum only in terms of sexual stereotypes means that her private values and ideals receive no public recognition or articulation. Her defense is to kill Tötges. Nevertheless, she does not shoot him to gain revenge. Instead, as the conclusion demonstrates, she shoots Tötges only when he acts in such a way as to threaten what remains of her private world:

"Er sagte "Na, Blümchen, was machen wir zwei denn jetzt?" Ich sagte kein Wort, wich ins Wohnzimmer zurück, und er kam mir nach und sagte: "Was guckst du mich so entgeistert an, mein Blümelein - ich schlage vor, daß wir jetzt erst einmal bumsen." Nun, inzwischen war ich bei meiner Handtasche, und er ging mir an die Kledage, und ich dachte: "Bumsen, meinetwegen", und ich hab die Pistole rausgenommen und sofort auf ihn geschossen (120).

Ja, nun müssen Sie nicht glauben, daß es was Neues für mich war, daß ein Mann mir an die Kledage wollte - wenn Sie von Ihrem vierzehnten Lebensjahr an, und schon früher, in Haushalten arbeiten, sind Sie was gewohnt. Aber dieser Kerl - und dann "Bumsen", und ich dachte: Gut, jetzt bumst's (120).

Ich dachte natürlich auch an den Erschossenen da in meiner Wohnung. Ohne Reue, ohne Bedauern, er wollte doch bumsen, und ich habe gebumst, oder? (121)

As these passages make clear, Katharina Blum shoots only when Tötges attempts to violate her personally. He is, in accordance with her personal values, zudringlich. To allow him to violate her in this manner would mean that he had finally destroyed her private sense of honor as well as her public honor. In actuality, then, Katharina Blum's act of violence is not so much revenge for a public loss of honor, as it is a defense of private integrity.

In the end, Katharina Blum's private definition of honor remains inaccessible to others, making it impossible for those around her to understand her motivations. Realizing that Tötges, as a man, is able to render sex an act of violence, Katharina Blum, in the only way possible for a woman, responds in kind by equating the sexual act with a violent one ("ich habe gebumst"). Her defense, however, ultimately remains unsatisfactory. An act of violence cannot redeem her public name, nor can it challenge the sexual stereotypes which have been used to undermine her individual values. Like her attempts to define herself in terms other than sexual stereotypes, her defense remains locked and isolated within a private world. As an act of rebellion, the shooting of Tötges does not challenge the rigid stereotypes, nor does it free her from them.

Notes

1 Der Spiegel, 29 July 1974.

2 In 1972, Kiepenheuer & Witsch Verlag published a documentation entitled: Heinrich Böll: Freies Geleit für Ulrike Meinhof - Ein Artikel und seine Folgen. The book presented the many articles, interviews, defamations, and disagreements which were connected with Böll's Spiegel article.

3 Wolf Donner, "Der lüsterne Meinungsterror: Ein Buch, ein Film, eine deutsche Krankheit," Die Zeit, 17 October 1975, p. 15; Joachim Kaiser, "Liebe und Haß der heiligen Katharina," Süddeutsche Zeitung, 10-11 August 1974, p. 76.

4 Rainer Nägele, Heinrich Böll: Einführung in das Werk und in die Forschung (Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum Fischer, 1976), p. 162.

5 Marcel Reich-Ranicki, "Der deutschen Gegenwart mitten ins Herz," Frankfurter Allgemeine, 24 August 1974.

6 See, for example: Margit M. Sinka, "Heinrich Böll's Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum as Novel," Colloquia Germanica 14 (1981), 158-74; William S. Sewell, "'Konduktion und Niveauunterschiede': The Structure of Böll's Katharina Blum," Monatshefte 74 (1982), 167-77; Rhys W. Williams, "Heinrich Böll and the Katharina Blum Debate," Critical Quarterly 21 (1979), 49-58.

⁷ Rhys W. Williams, "Heinrich Böll and the Katharina Blum Debate," 53; Margit M. Sinka, "Heinrich Böll's Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum as Novelle," 164; J.C. Franklin, "Alienation and the Retention of the Self: The Heroines of Der gute Mensch von Sezuan, Abschied von Gestern, and Die Verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum," Mosaic 12 (1979), 94.

⁸ Heinrich Böll, Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum (Munich: DTV, 1976), p. 90. All other quotations from the novel are from this edition.

⁹ Wolfram Schutte, "Notwehr, Widerstand und Selbstrettung," Frankfurter Rundschau, 10 August 1974.

¹⁰ Eberhard Scheiffele, in his article, "Kritische Sprachanalyse in Heinrich Bölls Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum," in Basis, ed. Reinhold Grimm and Jost Hermand (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1979), pp. 169-87, examines the language used in this novel. Although Scheiffele does not concentrate on the sexual aspects of the story, his analysis points to the elaborate language prefiguration and spectrum of stereotypes which color the reader's perception--specifically of Katharina--from the beginning.